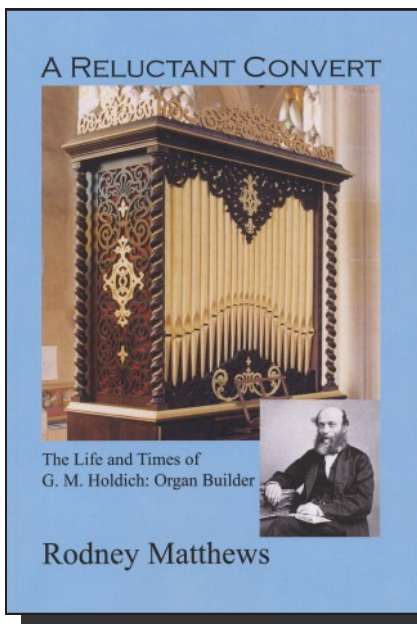


A RELUCTANT CONVERT

The Life and Times of G. M. Holdich: Organ Builder

Book Review



George Maydwell Holdich (1816-1896) is one of our own. A man born into a Northamptonshire landowning family with clerical connections (which was to come in useful to a London based organ builder). He was brought up, as many NDOA members know at Maidwell Rectory but rather than following in the family tradition of entering one of the clerical, medical, legal or military professions became fascinated instead by the organ and set up business as an organ builder. Several of his relatives, as well as entering the typical upper middle-class professions, demonstrated an aptitude for working with their hands: fretwork, wood-work, wood-carving etc. and his sister Jane made models of churches that were described as 'done very neatly'.

Educated at Uppingham School, Holdich appears not to have followed the rest of his family to university. There is a gap between leaving Uppingham in 1832 and his first appearance in the trade directories as an organ builder in 1837. No record exists of his apprenticeship although it is generally believed to have been with J. C. Bishop of London.

The rather obscure title of the book appears to come from Holdich's preference for building organs in the pre-Victorian English style, eschewing the continental influences which were beginning to change the way that English organ builders approached the building and re-building of organs. Like Bishop, Holdich showed a preference for a mellow sound as opposed to the bright continental choruses that were to become the fashion. Over a fifty year period Holdich built some 500 organs. Sadly, almost all of his larger organs were replaced as fashions changed, but many of those he built for country churches have survived and are highly regarded as examples of an earlier English tradition. With their octave and a half pedal boards and only an octave of bourdons, Holdich's organs were ill-suited to the organ music of J. S. Bach which Mendelssohn promoted in England in the 1840s. Nevertheless, Holdich embraced innovations such as independent pedal divisions on his larger organs. He also claimed to have invented the Diaocton, an octave coupler that brought into play an extra octave of pipes although this was widely disputed at the time as other organ builders had also developed similar stops on their organs. He was accused, rather unfairly, of copying this device from others and it does appear that Holdich came up with the idea independently of other organ builders.

There is some background history of the Holdich family as well as maps showing the clusters of Holdich organs. Out of the 500 or so organs that Holdich built many were in London but fifteen organs went to Leicestershire and thirty-eight to Northamptonshire. The rest were more sparsely spread out and in the South West far less frequent. By and large, Holdich seems to have been most busy in London and the South East, the East and West Midlands and East Anglia although seventeen organs went to Yorkshire.

This book is based on the Reading University PhD thesis of Rodney Matthews who has rendered a great service to all who play, or are interested in, Holdich organs. Most of the material in the book is from Matthews' original research, but there is also new information that has since come to light. The NPOR depends upon voluntary reporting and enthusiastic organ watchers, and it is not always accurate. Holdich's own records were lost or destroyed some years ago when an old filing cabinet was thrown out by its owners. As well as maps showing locations of Holdich organs, there are also charts revealing how his organ specifications developed over time and photographs of several Holdich organs.

At £20.00 plus £3.50 postage and packing this is a rather pricey book (177 pages). It is available at present only from the publisher: At the Sign of the Pipe, The Grain Store Workshop, Coney Lodge, Park Farm Road, Birling, West Malling, ME19 5JZ. <http://www.signofthepipe.com/index.html> Should you wish, however, to know everything there is to know about G. M. Holdich this is the book for you. (BW).